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Introduction

Conflict over Northern Ireland’s constitutional status has placed a moratorium on reforming its governmental arrangements, perpetuating a chronic local democratic deficit. The Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland devolved assembly will go some way towards addressing this in the medium term. However, for the moment, given UK-wide concerns over the power of unelected officialdom (the ‘new magistracy’), Northern Ireland remains a quango state in extremis with a greater paucity of powers vested in elected local government than in Great Britain. Nonetheless, new forms of decision-making structure enjoying the allegiance of both communities have developed. Chiefly, the emergence of ‘responsibility sharing’ within local government and of partnerships between local authorities and other agencies and individuals has quietly revolutionized sub-central government within Northern Ireland. Hence, Northern Ireland is interesting because of its implications for Great Britain.

This paper attempts three things. First, it provides an evaluation of the developments in local government over the past few years. Second, it focuses on the new functions, partnership arrangements and responsibility sharing which have blossomed of late, while considering how the 1997 local government elections furthered the progress in improving inter-community relations in Northern Ireland. Third, based on the success of partnerships and responsibility sharing, it outlines possible changes to the structure of sub-central governance in Northern Ireland. The paper concludes with a call for developing a comparative dimension in drawing lessons for reforming the process of sub-central governance elsewhere in the UK and beyond.

Local government in Northern Ireland

The Stormont period and the Macrory reforms

By the 1960s, local government was ripe for reform, reflecting similar concerns to those raised in Great Britain. The Northern Ireland government’s predilection

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was for regional structures and a unitary system of local government. The 'troubles' served as a catalyst, accelerating a process of modernization. Concern centred on the inadequate fiscal and administrative capacity of many smaller units in a system of 73 local authorities largely unaltered since its inception in 1898. To these worries were added those relating to political malpractice associated with gerrymandered electoral boundaries, plural voting, discriminatory employment and housing allocation practices. Local government seemed moribund (Arthur, 1989; Birrell and Murie, 1980; Whyte, 1990).

In 1969, the Stormont government commissioned Sir Patrick Macrory to examine the future of local government. Macrory's Report (1970) was informed greatly by Scotland's Wheatley Report (1969) calling for a single tier of district councils to discharge prosaic functions like leisure services, civic and environmental amenities. Large expenditure areas, like education, housing, personal social services, planning and highways (law and order was not a local government function), were to be transferred to a province-wide level, or to be delivered either through central departments, or a system of boards and single-purpose bodies, accountable to Stormont. Throughout, the 'existence of a regional government at Stormont as a sine qua non in a future administrative structure underpinned [Macrory's] recommendations' (Knox, 1990a: 37).

Macrory was not greeted enthusiastically. Many unionist councillors resented what was seen as Stormont's intrusion. However, amid Northern Ireland's ongoing civil unrest, implementation of Macrory's recommendations was quickly overtaken by the deteriorating political situation. Under Direct Rule, the Westminster government proceeded with reform through the Local Government (NI) Act, 1972. In 1973, a system of district councils was formed having powers broadly in line with Macrory's suggestions. Crucially, however, the imposition of Direct Rule effectively stymied the bulk of Macrory's proposals. The ensuing removal of a substantial amount of political accountability over a wide range of erstwhile local government functions was dubbed the 'Macrory Gap', an unfair euphemism since he was not the architect of this new arrangement. The reforms bore all the hallmarks of 'an official-led administrative system' with input from local politicians being minimal, even frowned upon (Connolly and Erridge, 1990). This system has endured to this day, reform involving partial and rolling restoration of powers and democratization being impeded by deadlock on the overarching constitutional question.

Current arrangements

Northern Ireland is the limiting case of central control and residualized local government in the UK (Carmichael, 1996). Ostensibly, since its reform, local government has played a minor role. The 26 single-tier authorities are limited chiefly to the delivery of minor regulatory services. They provide representatives to sit on otherwise government-appointed area boards that deliver major services like education and social services. Councillors have a consultative role in relation to housing, planning, and water services which are delivered through 'Next

Steps' agencies or similar arm's-length organizations. Thus, local authorities' combined budgets amount to £230m., only 3 percent of identifiable public expenditure in the Province (Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury, 1996).

Nonetheless, local government remains worthy of academic enquiry for three reasons. First, local authorities are the only democratically elected executive fora in Northern Ireland since the demise of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1986. Hence, they are symbolically significant. Apart from MPs/MEPs, local councillors are the only elected representatives to whom citizens can turn to voice concerns on public services, even though most functions reside with unelected bodies. Councillors have an importance beyond the confines of their direct responsibilities, often mediating between constituents and central service providers over issues of housing, planning and, in particular, social security. Second, since elections use the single transferable vote (STV) form of proportional representation, multi-party coalitions are commonplace. Third, with 9000 staff, local government is a large employer in a region with high unemployment. Finally, any future political accommodation in Northern Ireland will involve a reassessment of the role of local government.

Recent development in local government

An inauspicious legacy

Dissatisfaction with current arrangements is matched by a yearning for improvements to the quality of local democracy but progress towards effecting formal structural improvements has been minimal. Rather, the emphasis has been on process. Specifically, there have been three developments: the conferment of more functions on local authorities; a form of responsibility sharing, in which political parties in councils agree to share power (irrespective of political control), has become the norm in many local authorities; the concept of partnership, and the associated principles of all-inclusive forms of decision making, have become firmly established. The acquisition of new functions in respect of local economic development and community relations, coupled with the provision of monies under the Delors Peace and Reconciliation initiative,[1] have been the catalysts which have facilitated developments.

New functions

Local authorities were traditionally incidental players in economic development, being confined to contributing to voluntary bodies which developed trade, industry and commerce in their area or, more generally, for furthering 'the interests of the council, its district or inhabitants' (section 115, Local Government Act 1972). Total payments were limited to 3p in the pound on the rateable value of the district.[2] Since 1992, however, councils have been permitted to spend up to 5p in the pound from rates for the specific purpose of economic development. Though modest when compared with the budgets of central government agencies

(the Industrial Development Board and Local Economic Development Unit) tasked with the same responsibility, councils have been innovative in its usage. They have established extensive networks with private companies, set up arm's-length enterprise facilities and used their limited resources as seed-corn finance or matching grants to tap into larger EU funding sources (Knox, 1996b).

Second, local councils are prominent in community development and community relations. In 1989, the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU)[3] invited councils to participate in a community relations programme aimed at developing cross-community contact and cooperation between the two communities, promoting greater mutual understanding and increasing respect for different cultural traditions. The programme attracted 75 percent grant-aid from central government to employ community relations officers within councils and implement programmes of activity congruent with the above objectives. All 26 councils joined the initiative which was subsequently judged a useful community-based approach to micro conflict management (Hughes and Knox, 1997). Given the conditions associated with joining the initiative (e.g. agreement on a cross-party basis to participate), vesting responsibility for community relations in local councils was, from a government perspective, a way of promoting consensus at the political level and, by example, in the community. An active involvement in this area by councils, given their chequered history of discrimination, added to the emerging climate of cross-party cooperation and stability, and demonstrated a more responsible approach to an incremental increase in powers.

Third, local authorities have become pivotal brokers in partnership arrangements designed to deliver European-funded service programmes. In 1995, the EU launched a Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, a 300m. ECU package designed to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society following terrorist cease-fires. District partnerships, representing each council area, and comprising local councillors, community/voluntary representatives, business and trade union interests, and statutory organizations, approve action plans for local activities to advance the objectives of the programme. These have harnessed the emerging goodwill in local authorities, mobilized an apathetic business sector into taking ownership of social goals and energized the voluntary sector which has played a vital role in community development.

Responsibility sharing

Widespread revulsion at the Enniskillen bombing (1987) was instrumental in fostering a change in attitudes. From 1988, open reference was being made to 'responsibility sharing' on councils, a term attributed to Ken Maginnis (MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone), in deference to unionist sensitivities over 'power-sharing'. For one councillor 'a growth in power sharing would do a great deal to change the mood music of Ulster politics and to build the trust between parties which is the necessary precursor to a larger political accommodation' (private interview with authors). Dungannon District Council pioneered an experiment in responsibility sharing. In May 1988, it established a special committee which

passed a resolution recognizing 'responsibility sharing as an important step which might help us to develop trust in the community'. The motion was initiated by the UUP, SDLP and independent nationalists. It was agreed that the position of chair would be rotated, every six months, between council members 'who deplore violence and seek to pursue political progress by political means'. This effectively excluded Sinn Fein, while the DUP refused to participate. Given that the council was hung 11–11 between unionists and nationalists (but with a unionist holding the casting vote), the arrangement introduced a transfer of power between the two blocs. 'Many councillors … felt the need to bring an end to sterile adversarial politics in a common commitment to economic and general well-being of the area, and they found in their opposition to political violence more in common than they had previously recognised' (Beirne, cited in Knox, 1996a: 9).

Local elections in 1989 marked a turning point in council chambers because of the decline in representation from the political extremes (as denoted by the DUP and Sinn Fein). Eleven councils appointed mayors/chairmen and deputies from both political traditions. Central government then nurtured the process by offering 75 percent grants-in-aid for its new community relations initiative to those councils which agreed on a cross-party basis to participate in schemes.[4] A unified response by all councillors against the prospects of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) underscored the rapprochement. The 1993 local elections consolidated matters.

In his evaluation of responsibility sharing, Knox (1996a) concluded that, while the potential for transfer to the macro Northern Ireland context would not be simple, there was 'evidence of good-will emerging between politicians at local level, some of whom would see themselves as candidates in any national [NI] forum. Moreover, the momentum is strong for political developments on the back of long-awaited cease-fires.' The Good Friday Agreement (10 April 1998) bolsters this. Conflicts between the DUP and Sinn Fein remain but, even here, there is evidence of a willingness of both to 'recognise unbridgeable political positions but get on with council business'. Certainly, for the UUP and SDLP, there are far fewer reservations.

Inevitably, the motives underscoring the embrace of responsibility sharing are not always wholesome. The concept of the double minority (that is, a Protestant minority in Ireland as a whole, and a Catholic minority in Northern Ireland), is accompanied by a third variant, namely, a Protestant minority in western Northern Ireland and most of its component district council areas. The psychological impact of the 'numbers game' cannot be overstated in Northern Ireland. Hence, the 'writing on the wall' scenario is one with special resonance for unionists, particularly in the west of the province, who either form a minority or are set to become such in the near future, because of demographic changes. However, whatever the initial motives, once established, responsibility sharing is now a fait accompli. Moreover, Knox's (1995) investigations demonstrated that the 'electorate at least provide evidence of a greater propensity to transfer votes

within and between the main political blocs in power sharing councils … In short, the electorate want compromise' (pp. 25–6).

Building partnerships

Partnership arrangements help remove barriers preventing dialogue within council chambers. Ironically, while some local authorities remain beset by inter-party hostility (especially surrounding Sinn Fein), partnerships in their areas frequently enjoy unprecedented engagement and cooperation, advancing the shared interests of both communities. To that extent, partnerships have provided an alternative and fruitful way forward through otherwise impenetrable terrain.

One of the most successful partnership arrangements has developed to disburse the EU Peace and Reconciliation Funds Package. District partnerships, comprising an equal number of representatives from the council, community/voluntary and business/trade union/statutory sectors, have operated since early 1996 in each local authority. The process aims to achieve peace and reconciliation objectives by broadening participation through socially inclusive programmes in employment, productive investment and urban/rural regeneration. The district partnership concept is analogous to a 'greenfield site' offering a new development in widening the basis of participation in decision making throughout the 26 district council areas, 'uncontaminated' by past associations with any national government, or with any particular tradition within the Province, all of which has undoubtedly accounted for the enthusiastic reception it has generated across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland. Despite a hostile operating environment, partnerships have been successful because of the goodwill and energy invested by partnership members in the process. The tight time factor encourages success. The ideological baggage which participants brought to the process was left outside meetings. People otherwise implacably opposed to one another were freed from the constraints of party loyalty. A further reason cited for the success of the partnership model is its capacity to harness the expertise and experience of the different sectors. The involvement of groups traditionally critical of many public sector bodies in the decision-making process has challenged the voluntary/community sector to assume responsibility, in part, for its solution. Partnerships operate on a criterion which seeks that 40 plus percent of members are women. Most partnerships have met this target and overall representation is much higher than in councils (or quangos).

The district partnerships sub-programme of the Delors Package has occasioned strategic planning activity across Northern Ireland with an unprecedented intensity of bottom-up participation. Mid-term evaluation of the programme suggests that there has been a proactive approach by all the partnerships in working with groups and researching key local priorities, via a process of out-reach to include various elements in their local communities. There is evidence of a thorough and consistent approach to communicating plans. Partnerships have the potential to be an effective means of improving relationships between multiple stakeholders and to combine the human and financial resources of a variety of

funders to fulfil shared objectives. They are not an alternative to traditional forms of representative government (namely, at sub-national level in the UK, directly elected, multi-purpose local authorities) but, instead, are a complementary means to deal with complex problems like social exclusion and urban decline. The notion of partnership accords with concepts like limited government and subsidiarity, that is, reducing (central) state activity and devolving decision making to a local level. In Northern Ireland, where the absence of powers for elected politicians has led to government by quango and agency, such arguments have added piquancy since the democratic deficit is that much wider in a context of profound inter-community division.

Despite the attendant problems associated with partnerships, local authorities have demonstrated a readiness to both enter such arrangements and make them succeed, not least because of the financial inducements as, for example, with money from the Delors Package. In part, too, however, the willingness to entertain responsibility sharing has extended to a willingness to involve as many in the community as possible in decision making. This has had the effect of not only including socially excluded groups but also those (in business and professional occupations, and in charitable and voluntary organizations) detached from local politics, disillusioned and repelled by ugly scenes of sectarianism in a small number of councils, as well as the apparent futility of debate in fora which are perceived as essentially redundant.

Clearly, although their budgets and influence are marginal to the totality of public expenditure (£40m. over three years set against £8bn annually), district partnerships meet the requirements for agreement, consent and acceptance by both communities. In that sense, the level of spending is almost incidental — what is important is the process of changing attitudes, creating social inclusion and capacity building.

The importance of partnerships in cementing any constitutional settlement which might be agreed have been recognized by new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Marjorie Mowlam. In her ‘First 100 Days’ speech, she declared that:

> Here in Northern Ireland, we have taken steps to open up government and include more people in the decisions we have to make … We want to see new democratic institutions in Northern Ireland too … People here have missed out for far too long on an accountable and democratic system of government. But to be successful in a divided community like Northern Ireland, any new democratic institutions have to be founded on agreement and consent. They have to command the support of both communities here. (Northern Ireland Information Service [http://www.nio.gov.uk/newsbrief.htm])

She added:

> The development of partnerships is, to my mind, one of the most encouraging and worthwhile initiatives of recent years. While there is no single, all-embracing model for partnerships, they all have at their core the principles of participation and proportionality. This is a direction I consider we could usefully explore further in Northern Ireland.

Local elections

In the absence of any alternative democratically elected forum, coupled with what amounts to the effective disenfranchisement of the Province's electorate from mainstream party politics at Westminster, people in Northern Ireland have no other way of expressing their political views than via local elections. Hence, turnout for local government elections is high (Carmichael, 1994; Chief Electoral Officer, 1997). The elections themselves occur every four years using STV.

In 1997, some 1100 candidates contested 582 seats. A degree of election fatigue was discernible with both the Forum and Westminster elections within the previous 12 months and three weeks respectively of the local government elections held on 22 May 1997. The elections were seen, as always, as two intra-community contests. The Ulster Unionist Party attempted to extend its lead over the DUP. Sinn Fein's significantly improved electoral strength was tested by the SDLP. The political environment for the elections can best be described as intransigence and continuing violence: the political vacuum of multi-party talks apparently going nowhere; Sinn Fein's exclusion from the political process; and ongoing IRA and loyalist violence, despite claims by the latter that their ceasefire remained intact. At the local level, however, the efforts of 12 of the 26 councils to engage, to varying degrees, in power sharing appeared at odds with the stalemate politics of the centre.

Turnout in 1997 was broadly maintained (53.77 percent) but pronounced changes to the electoral map of the Province consolidated recent trends (see Carmichael, 1994; Knox, 1990b, 1990c). Across the Province, turnout tended to fall from west to east. Areas with more evenly balanced religious compositions (largely in the west) recorded greater levels of voter activity than predominantly Catholic or Protestant areas. For example, in Cookstown (with a fairly mixed population in terms of religious composition), one electoral division recorded a turnout of 83.38 percent. By contrast, in North Down (overwhelmingly Protestant), one electoral division saw a 30 percent turnout. Interestingly, in Belfast, turnout in overwhelmingly Catholic areas (such as Lower Falls, at 65.59 percent) was considerably higher than in overwhelmingly Protestant ones (such as Pottinger, at 49.68 percent). The divergence in turnout levels between predominantly Catholic and predominantly Protestant areas was significant. A sharp decline in unionist support, the unchecked growth of Sinn Fein's vote, a surge in the numbers of nationalists voting and the emergence of fringe loyalist parties as significant local political forces in their own right, ensured dramatic changes in several councils. After decades of abstentionism and half-hearted participation, the slow realization of the numerical strength of nationalist opinion, especially in western Northern Ireland, has begun to make an impact. For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, almost all councils west of the River Bann are now controlled outright or effectively by nationalists. Mainstream unionist parties lost overall control of Belfast, Fermanagh, Cookstown and Strabane Councils. Unionist parties now control 14 of the 26 districts (including UUP overall control of Banbridge District Council), nationalists control nine councils (including

SDLP overall control of Down), and three councils are effectively deadlocked (Belfast, Dungannon and Moyle).

The high nationalist turnout and a significant transfer of SDLP voters to Sinn Fein were attributed to anger over the Drumcree issue of July 1996. Moreover, Sinn Fein's common touch and adroit campaigning on bread and butter issues consolidated its core vote. That said, the party did not benefit from transfers to the same extent as did the DUP from Ulster Unionists, leaving Sinn Fein under-represented in council chambers. Hence, Sinn Fein's 74 seats (on 16.9 percent vote) represented just 12.7 percent of the total seats. The DUP, with a smaller vote share (15.6 percent), but benefiting from UUP transfers, won 91 seats.

In themselves, the results mean that the overall pattern of responsibility sharing has changed little with the new appointments (mayor/deputy mayor in borough councils and chair/vice-chair in district councils) which followed the elections. Twelve councils, mainly nationalist or hung councils, opted for cross-party posts, the exceptions being unionist-controlled Armagh and Lisburn. This confirms the pattern of power sharing since the mid-1980s, with unionists more reluctant to introduce a cross-community shareout of top posts. However, the process has become entrenched, underscored by developments in Belfast, providing evidence that greater responsibility sharing and the encouragement of partnership arrangements will continue. In turn, councils where power is shared offer the prospect of a new era in the wider governance of the Province since they provide the potential for progress towards finding all-inclusive forms of decision making that can gain the allegiance of both communities.

Perhaps the most significant outcome was in the city of Belfast, one time bastion of unionism, but left with neither unionist nor nationalist blocs in overall control, and giving rise to the first nationalist Lord Mayor in its history. Given the years of pervasive negativism associated with the city's media image, much of which blighted the efforts of politicians and officials in other local authorities seeking to improve their own areas, the change in Belfast was profound. While responsibility sharing has progressed only incrementally, the addition of Belfast is a major leap forward. Given the city's salience as a microcosm of the tensions within Northern Ireland, the requirement for power sharing if effective city government is to function can serve only to strengthen the chances for a more general rapprochement throughout Northern Ireland.

The reform agenda and future prospects

Research for the Northern Ireland Chief Executives' Forum and Rowntree Foundation revealed that the emergence of a new assembly was recognized by most Chief Executives as posing major questions about the future administration/government of Northern Ireland (Carmichael et al., 1997). One certain consequence was that the existing structure of local authorities would change. However, the role of local government is inextricably bound up with Northern Ireland's constitutional fate, driven by the reluctance of many, especially nationalists, wary of the chequered history of local government, to countenance serious

change until the macro-political situation is resolved ('nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'). A considerable shake-up in public-sector provision was envisaged by most chief executives for those services delivered at levels below that of a regional/provincial assembly.

As to what form a revised system of local government might take, various propositions exist. Although much smaller units are commonplace elsewhere in continental Europe, there is no real parallel within the British Isles. Indeed, the likelihood is that the figure of 26 councils will be scaled down. One suggestion was that 'to have more than six or eight local authorities in Northern Ireland is a complete joke' (private interview), a view signalling that the restoration of the six county councils, plus separate Belfast and Londonderry councils, might be possible. An alternative was to reduce the number of councils to 15, based on Westminster parliamentary constituencies. The current structure of four health and social services area boards, along with five education and library boards (based on areas conterminous with groups of existing districts) is yet another option canvassed. In addition, the possibility of a regional authority for those essentially strategic functions, such as highways, fire services and water, bears crucially on the debate.

Ordinarily, debates over the appropriate structural configuration for local government in any jurisdiction are conducted along various often competing dimensions and can be relied upon to arouse strong passions. Hence, one might anticipate that topography, demography, administrative efficiency, fiscal viability, community identity and socio-economic geography would all have a bearing. However, the imperatives of historical and contemporary politics are, in Northern Ireland's constitutional imbroglio, particularly salient. Devising an acceptable structure is a fraught process. Time employed on finding an optimal new structure might be better spent in investigating the scope for integrating some of the agentized services of central government into a small number of local authorities, thereby creating viable administrative and functional units. Since local authorities have been quietly proceeding with developing a more professional approach to their activities, their potential to act as 'enabling bodies' would be crucial for assisting development in local communities.

One consequence of the relative success of responsibility sharing has been the growing calls for a restoration of further functions. Such changes might be set alongside a parallel introduction of a tier of regional government. Whether change would be to those local authorities which have demonstrated their 'fitness for purpose', so to speak, or as a general revision is open to debate. In 1993, for example, the former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, suggested that a Macrory II was required as a precursor to reform. To allay the fears and suspicions of nationalists (and, indeed, of unionists), such a revised arrangement would be accompanied by effective safeguards such as an independent ombudsman. Archbishop Robin Eames, Church of Ireland Primate, in his submission to the Opsahl Commission (a forum established in February 1993 to elicit community views on the way forward) argued for more power to be

given to local councils where there was evidence of sharing of responsibility. This would be part of a more systematic progression which entailed 'slow, steady progress in building up inter-community confidence and trust' (Eames, 1993). Other suggestions include greater use of district partnerships, set up to distribute EU peace and reconciliation funds, in undertaking functions currently carried out by the plethora of appointed executive quangos, advisory bodies and tribunals, all of which add to the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland (Sweeney, 1997).

Thus far, successive British governments have only permitted a modest expansion of the powers of local government. However, a number of factors are at work which could encourage an accelerated return of functions. First, the Good Friday Agreement brings the prospect of a devolved government for the Province. Second is the adoption of unitary configurations of local government in much of Great Britain. Third, the government's concern to address the worst excesses of the quango state in the UK have a particular resonance for the people of Northern Ireland (aided by Nolan/Peach Reports). In the absence of alternative institutional arrangements, controversial functions (e.g. fair employment, local government staffing procedures) were hived-off to non-departmental public bodies. Their growth has accentuated a system of governance already suffering from problems of political accountability, openness and accessibility. Taken together, it is inevitable that these issues will create additional momentum for a radical rethink.

Lessons for governance in Great Britain

Although the idiosyncrasies of Northern Ireland make applicability of any lessons to the rest of the UK and beyond only partial, the potential for policy comparison and transfer remains. Northern Ireland's local authorities have demonstrated that, despite (or, arguably, perhaps because of) a very modest portfolio of functions and powers, it is still possible for them to act as catalysts for effecting significant improvements in the lot of local citizens, while bridging some of the worst examples of social exclusion which blight so much of civic politics today. It is plausible that local authorities in Great Britain, spared the inter-community strife of Northern Ireland, should be able to make speedier progress in broadening the democratic process.

The Good Friday Agreement and British–Irish Treaty, the Labour government's UK devolution agenda and the unfolding European dimension, pose questions about the continuance of current arrangements for territorial management at all levels of government within Northern Ireland. Equally, Northern Ireland provides evidence of innovative modes of decision making which present opportunities for introducing new structures which satisfy the broad aims of subsidiarity, regionalization and democratization of government which apply throughout the UK and EU, as well as its own fraught local circumstances. In part, the UK Centre is fashioning 'new structures of inclusion which involve the citizens of Northern Ireland in effective and constructive participation in political life' (Aughey, 1990: 21). The subsequent Downing Street Declaration and Frameworks Document consolidated this. Thus, 'if the UK Centre can counte-

nance novel structures for the solution of its most troubled and troublesome corner, with a new dimension to solving Northern Ireland's problems, then it is only reasonable that a territorial operating code involving a European dimension can be found for a more quiescent Great Britain' (Carmichael, 1996: 430). There is a need for a refashioned structure of territorial management, reflecting the 'Europification' of the policy-making environment and the recognition of an increasingly differentiated British policy, together with forms of more inclusive government at local level to reinvigorate civic culture and restore tenuous public confidence in the policy process.

What evidence is there that such a fundamental change will occur in Great Britain? Clearly, debate about the future institutional architecture of the UK has progressed from the sterile arguments 'inherited from the late nineteenth century' (Marquand, 1988: 175–6). The old order of a dichotomy between high and low politics, central and local governments, based on compartmentalized and hierarchically arranged units of government insulated from direct popular participation in everyday decision making, has atrophied. There has been growing dissatisfaction with a narrow interpretation of governance based solely on periodic exercises in representative democracy with an otherwise inert citizenry. Direct state provision with concomitant expectation of passivity among recipients of public services has been partly usurped by the concept of enabling, whereby governments listen and respond to wishes of citizens as consumers as well as voters. The EU and recognition of the principles of subsidiarity, devolution and regionalism has cast a shadow over the traditional forms of territorial management. The result is 'a much deeper paradigm shift in which the concept of separate "vertical" tiers of government is being complemented and challenged by a new model of overlapping and interlocking "spheres"' (Bennington and Harvey, 1994: 952). Real partnership between tiers of government demands imaginative and flexible structures — what Keating (1993) spoke of as *engrenage* — the 'meshing together of European, national and sectoral interests' (p. 380). Northern Ireland's local authorities can proudly claim to be in the vanguard.

Notes

1. On 26 July 1995, the European Commission approved the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland, 1995–9. Total expenditure under the programme for the first three years (1995–7) has been 416m. ECU (approximately £350m.). The overall aim of the initiative is to: 'reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing cross-border cooperation and extending social inclusion' (Commission of the European Communities, Office in Northern Ireland, 1995).

2. Local government in Northern Ireland has not been the subject of rates reform experienced by councils in Great Britain in the late 1980s which heralded the much criticized community charge and subsequent council tax. For a detailed description of the comparison between Northern Ireland local government finance and the rest of the United Kingdom, see Barnett and Knox (1992).

3. CCRU is a dedicated unit within the Central Secretariat of the Northern Ireland Office charged with formulating, reviewing and challenging policy throughout the government system with the aim of improving community relations.

4. In June 1989, councils were invited to submit to central government (through the Central Community Relations Unit — CCRU) proposals for programmes to improve community relations in their district areas. These had to address at least some of the following: to develop cross-community contact and cooperation; to promote greater mutual understanding; and to increase respect for different cultural traditions.

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